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Julia Hall Decries Women's Plight in Bosnia

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Julia Hall '96 moved her audience to the verge of tears when she graphically depicted the desperate plight of women that she witnessed during a three-week mission to Bosnia. Now counsel to the Helsinki division of the Human Rights Watch, a leading U.S.-based human rights organization, Hall was warmly reunited with friends and faculty in the Faculty Lounge in O'Brian Hall last November 18. Speaking of her encounters, she says, "We've been in Egypt and Thailand and various parts of the world and I've never experienced as devastating a landscape — geographically and materially, psychologically and emotionally — as I experienced while I was in Bosnia."

Hall is not a stranger to international travel and research. A 1985 graduate of Fordham University, she attended the American University in Cairo, Egypt, as a Fulbright/ITT fellow, where she studied Mideastern Studies and Arabic. She has since traveled to Bangkok, Thailand, to work at the Thailand Ecumenical Coalition of Third World Tourism, and has attended Australia National University on a Rotary scholarship.

Amid her travels, Hall has made briefs stops back home, in Buffalo. In 1993, she earned a master's in sociology from the University at Buffalo, and subsequently attended UB Law as a Gilbert Moore fellow. The recipient of the Max Koren award as outstanding law student, Hall secured her human rights position after graduation. Earlier this year, she traveled to Northern Ireland, which resulted in her newly published report, "To Serve Without Favor: Policing, Human Rights, and Accountability in Northern Ireland."

In Bosnia, Hall and a team of her colleagues from the Human Rights Watch traveled to over 18 villages to interview Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Muslim women. "The striking feature of every single one of the over 100 interviews that we did," Hall says, "was the degree of depression, coupled with the post-war material deprivation that created a situation in which people were deprived of hope."

Initially, Hall and her colleagues were greeted with some resistance. "Women would come out of their homes and ask, 'Where were you during the war?' " she recalls. Over time, Hall and her team were able to win over the trust of the women, who then proved eager to talk.

While high-profile issues such as rape and sexual assault were obvious concerns, Hall and her colleagues immediately recognized a much broader range of issues distressing Bosnian women. "When we started to call women in Bosnia, the first thing they said was, 'Don't come here and talk about rape.

Julia Hall '96

We're tired of that. We have been exploited by the political parties, we have been exploited by the media, and we have been exploited by academics who come over and earn tenure off of our trauma.' "

In addition to a lack of witness protection for victims of rape and sexual assault, Hall's interviews revealed a skewed distribution of humanitarian aid, limited access to medical services, gender discrimination by micro-credit lending institutions, and a lack of employment and training programs for women. Although the nation now struggles to recover and rebuild, women are excluded from construction training, the largest area of employment during the post-conflict period.

"We will do anything," Hall says she was told by a Bosnian woman desperate to find employment. "We have walked up mountains in the dead of night to get military supplies that were dropped by airplane. I can carry back 50 pounds of canned goods, I can direct traffic, I can pour cement, I can carry a log."

During her visit, Hall was prohibited from traveling to the Republic of Serbia as the presence of war criminals at the point of entry raised serious security concerns. ■

PHOTO: JOHN HICKEY

pletely different worlds, never communicating. While he was there, a riot broke out over the raising of a flag. Three Albanians died. "I came across people who were hoping for another war so they can just get rid of this problem once and for all," he recounts.

Jennie M. Duran '98 had a somewhat similar experience. For her, working with the Center for Human Rights in Mexico City was a return to the country of her grandparents. "I went to Mexico thinking I was raised on the food, the culture — I can just go right in," she recalls. Being Mexican-American did help. She got inside two prisons. She was able to talk with people who had been tortured. "I was able to do things that I know I wouldn't be able to do if I looked different," she says. "Nobody once questioned that I was Mexican."

But Duran herself began to have questions. She couldn't quite put her finger on it. Maybe it was being overwhelmed by the size of Mexico City, by the smog, by the crammed mini-buses. When protests erupted over a Mexican receiving the death penalty in Texas, she found herself reacting more like an American, challenging people about why they didn't seem as upset with the misdeeds of their own government. "I went through a slow identity crisis," she recalls. "I don't fit perfectly into American culture. I don't fit perfectly into Mexican culture. I feel as though I'm suspended in the middle."

Mutua is pleased that the internships have sparked student thinking on a variety of levels. And while the experience was hardly a vacation, no one voiced regrets.

Duran says that what she did and saw in Mexico only strengthened her commitment to justice and an international career. "I didn't know if I had it in me when I arrived," she says. "Now I definitely see myself doing human rights work in Latin America after I graduate." ■